Maleficarum

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Maleficarum

by kototyph

Summary

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Notes

See the end of the work for notes

It's one of those days the sun barely touches, the sky grey, the grass all hoarfrost. The dogs are subdued and near-silent that morning, tails low and pressing close to his legs and each other as they pick their way across the fields towards the creek and its thickets.

Will hasn't been sleeping much, but he's used to the gritty feeling it leaves in his eyes, the numbness in his fingers. He's cold— even now, in full winter gear, wool coat and wool socks in sturdy boots, his hands deep in his pockets and his chin buried in his scarf. It's not even December. It was seventy degrees in Washington last week. He's still cold.

He lets the dogs steer, watching grass give way to dark clay and pale rocks under his feet as they come up to the bank and start to move parallel to it. He's not worried about them going into the water; the vegetation here has grown into an almost solid mass, trees all but buried in the tough brown twine of dead kudzu and grapevine. The creek, loud in spring and summer, murmurs quietly now. The wind is a fitful rustle in the branches overhead.

This last week, Minnesota, lingers on him like smoke, like the smell and sting of gunpowder, and he can't shake it. It nags at him, the Shrike and his copycat. He thinks about the dry, smooth heft of the antler racks in his hands, the surprising ease of forcing their blunt tips through flesh and bone.

He'd never touched the antlers. The sensation still lingers, strong enough that he catches himself scrubbing his hands on his coat as he walks, and he shoves them back into his pockets in fists.

Up ahead, Buster gives a soft whuff and dances away from a hawthorn bush that breaks the through the tangle of vines. Its red berries are one of the only spots of colors in Will's whole field of vision, though they're shriveled and dark against the black bark.

It's probably just birds, he thinks, and still jerks back with a hissed, *"Shit!"* when three or four of them explode shrieking out of the branches. They fly so close he feels the breeze from their wings, what might be the tip of one brushing his hair, and he swears again as he ducks with this arms over his head.

When he turns and looks, the birds are pinprick silhouettes disappearing into the gloom. "Jesus Christ," he mutters, squinting after them. He slowly straightens, and holds out his hands for the dogs to lick and push their heads under. See, everything's fine. Just fine. He looks back at the hawthorn.

He thinks it's a nest at first. It would have to be an empty one, considering the season, but it's too uniform: a tight bundle of sticks with a pale streak of something around the middle, tying them together.

The dogs mill around his feet, uncertain. Will hesitates, then slowly reaches into the bush and pulls the bundle out.

The twigs, each about six inches long, have been splayed in an hourglass shape. Two longer twigs stick out at the top and bottom— legs and arms. There's a desiccated leaf wedged into

the top— the head. The faded blue scrunchie that ties them all together is dirty and water-stained, like it's been in the bush for years.

It can't have been. They'd burned them all— all the ones they could find.

Will's skin starts to crawl where it touches the brittle twigs, and he almost throws it into the thicket before he thinks— God, he can't just leave it out here, knowing it's this close to the house but not knowing *where* . The idea is even more panic-inducing than holding it is, and Will reels around with a weak whistle for the dogs and jogs all the way back with them at his heels, thinking of the gasoline in the garage and the firepit he hasn't used since July.

There's an unfamiliar car outside the house, and a familiar face waiting for him on the porch. Abigail looks at the twig fetish in his hand and her already pale face drains completely of color. She reaches into her purse.

Abigail's twigs are held together with a dirty pink ribbon. "I didn't know where to go," she says.

Inside the house, there's coffee from yesterday still in the pot. Will sticks in the microwave and Abigail sits at the kitchen table, the bundles on the scarred wood in front of her. They look like children's playthings, in part because they were.

"I didn't know what to do," she says quietly, hunched over her sleek indigo bag. She's well-dressed, a lovely silk ascot tied at her throat the same color as her bruised-looking eyes, a soft pink on her lips. "I've been… seeing things. Hearing them. I found it a week ago, and it's been happening ever since."

"What kinds of things?"

Abigail looks down at the figures. "The same as before. It's like something's there. Like it's following me."

The microwave beeps. Will doesn't move, and Abigail's eyes lift to his.

"Will. I—"

"You should go," Will says, and her mouth rounds in mute hurt. "No, not like that, I mean. Leave it here, with me. I'll deal with it."

She wants to do it, he sees. Wants to push away from the table and run from the room, to her car, maybe never stop running. Because she's Abigail, she straightens her shoulders and says, "No. You shouldn't do it alone."

"Let me try,"Will says, because Christ, look at her. She looks like a Tiffany vase in an junkyard, the wreck of his life piled around her in heaps of old newspaper and dirty dishes. The car outside probably cost more than his house. She's done something with her life, is obviously thriving in a way Will stopped expecting to before he'd even left New Orleans. If it's down to the two of them again, Will knows who should make it. "You should go back to…"

“Baltimore,” Abigail says. “I live in Baltimore now. I’m not leaving.”

“Small world,” Will says. Maybe that explains how she’d been able to find him after all these years. “Abby—”

“I’m not leaving,” she says, and then more quietly, “I don’t think it will make any difference.”

He leaves for work with Abigail on the battered couch, bookended by Max and Harley and with Ellie in her lap, watching the news. He gets a spare evidence bag from his trunk and takes the fetishes with him, not sure if he wants them where he can see them or out of sight until he shuts them in the glovebox and immediately breaks out in a cold sweat. He fumbles open the catch and they tumble out onto the floor, still in the bag, still there. Of course they’re there, he thinks. Of course they are.

Will puts them on the dashboard in front of the wheel and drives distractedly, running a light in Reston and almost rear-ending two or three cars on 95 on the way to Quantico.

“Hey, you okay?” Beverly, coffees in hand, peeks into his office around eleven. Will has been staring at the fetishes for hours, mind running in queasy circles, and hasn’t even opened his email yet. Before he can answer, her eyes fall to the bundles. “Creepy. New case?”

“Old case,” Will says, feeling it in his bones. “More than ten years.”

“Interest officially piqued.” She sets a paper coffee cup on a stack of old fieldwork journals next to Will’s mouse and takes her own to the sagging chair next to his coatrack. His is a consultant’s office, with a consultant’s status; that is to say, at the far end of the hall, past the stairwell, the size of and perhaps even historically a storage closet. The desk, chair and coatrack cover nearly all available floorspace. “I’m waiting for lab results and don’t want to do my paperwork. Tell me a story, Graham.”

He opens his mouth to tell her there’s no story here, but maybe talking about it will help. Make it just another case to be solved, a murderer to be found, and Will can at least do that.

“It’s not a good story,” he warns her. He takes the coffee, which is somehow even more terrible than the reheated pot from this morning. “They didn’t catch it. Him. Whoever it was.”

“Seasonally appropriate, then,” she says, raising her eyebrows. “Halloween is Monday.”

“Yeah, I guess. Ah. Five victims total, all in the same neighborhood, all in about three months. Two of them worked together as staff at a local group home. Violent deaths, each of them— stabbing, slashing.” Will swallows. “Lots of blood.”

“Where do the Blair Witch dollies come in?” Beverly asks.

“They were found on each of the bodies,” Will says. “One for each. Not these two, these were found, uh, later.”

“*Creepy* ,” Beverley says with relish, and Will gives her a weak half-smile. “Wait, is that it? Where did they come from?”

Will tries to sound clinical. “It turned out the group home wasn’t exactly running above board. The investigating team uncovered a lot of— of abuse. Confinement, beatings. Starvation. They found out a couple of the kids had been making these things from stuff around the property and hiding them places. The kids said the, uh, dolls were protecting them.”

“How old were the kids?” Beverley immediately demands. “Are we talking children of the corn, or like, trademark Troubled Young Men, here?”

Will feels a bit offended. “It was a girl and boy. Young. Eleven and seven.”

“*Extra* creepy.”

“They weren’t charged or anything,” Will says, nettled. “The cops couldn’t find anything linking the kids to the other three murders.” They hadn’t ever wanted anyone else to die. “They eventually decided it was a coincidence they found fetishes with the bodies. The kids put them in a lot of places— old buildings, empty lots.”

“And the murders just stopped? No escalation?”

After they’d scoured the neighborhood and built a fire in the woods. “The police presence was pretty high, and it was the bad side of town. A lot of transients. They closed down the group home and a few other staff members went to jail on charges of neglect. The children still in the home went back into the system, ended up all over the state.”

“Boo,” she says, pursing her lips. “Poor babies. But if we’re reopening the case, there must have been some new development.”

“Sorry. It’s kind of a personal project,” Will says. “It’s an... interesting case.”

“No kidding,” Beverly says, chin on her knee. “It’s cool you keep up with it. God knows we have enough cold cases no one gives a damn about.”

“Right.” Will twitches his shoulder in an aborted shrug. “Someone’s got to.”

“Absolutely.” Beverly nods, and glances at the clock on the wall. “And on that kind of professionally sad note— want to get lunch? I hear they’ve got coconut shrimp in the buffet today.”

“Thanks. I’d better not,” Will says, looking down at his coffee. He regrets the impulse to talk, memories like stirred silt rising and falling behind his eyes. Dread scratches at the inside of his throat. “I start classes at one, I’ve barely done anything.”

“Okay, but you better eat something,” Beverly says sternly, unfolding from the chair. “I’ll know if you don’t.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“I mean it!”

“I know you do,” he says, and watches her walk out.

Another hour of half-hearted work on the computer and it’s time to leave. The fetishes sit on his desk under industrially bright florescent lighting: a bunch of sticks tied together, nothing mysterious or uncanny about the crumbling bark or fragile leaves. Will hesitates, looking at them. He could probably fit them in his bag with his laptop and files, but they’d be crushed. He doesn’t want them out in the open, doesn’t want his students asking questions.

He leaves them on the desk, and after a moment’s consideration, he closes the door behind him.

The lectures themselves are uneventful, but after hours there’s Jack and an ambush in the bathroom, a *psychiatrist* in their casework conference room . Will is more defensive than he means to be but there’s something about the steady way the man watches him, the way he seems to absorb every retort with only superficial reaction. The man’s eyes, even when Will looks away, when he gets up and moves to the corkboard, even when he storms out, never leave him. It puts Will on edge.

He’s almost out of the building when he remembers the fetishes in his office, swears out loud, and reverses direction. He doesn’t want to see Jack or the odd Dr. Lecter, so he takes the long way around: up through the northwest stairwell and several corridors colonized by the survival skills people. By the time he gets back to the behavioral unit, it’s mostly deserted, but not quite. He passes Beverly’s office and she’s deep in thought behind her computer screen, a pen holding her hair in a bun.

“I see you, Will Graham!” she yells after him as he walks by. A second later, a granola bar comes flying out of her door, smacking into the opposite wall and sliding down. It’s almost enough to make him smile.

Further down the hall, his office door is still closed. The fetishes are gone.

Will stares at his desk, covered in books and case files but otherwise bare, and slowly enters the room. He looks around into corners, under the desk, on the bookcases, behind the computer. Gone.

They’re gone.

“Bev?” he calls. He’s on his hands and knees, feeling through the wires behind the CPU. Nothing.

No one answers him. Will shoves his hair out of his eyes and sits back, looking over the desk at the hallway outside. “Hey, Beverly?”

She’s not in her office, though her screen is still lit and the pen from her hair is on the keyboard, right above the space bar. Will lingers in her doorway, staring at that pen. Probably went to the bathroom, he reasons. Or home. He doesn’t see her bag, so that might be it. It’s fine.

And the fetishes— well, agents aren't supposed to keep evidence in their offices, let alone mere consultants. Some well-meaning busybody probably saw the evidence bag and returned it for filing, despite the fact that it wasn't sealed, had no case number on it. Occam's razor. The fetishes didn't just *disappear,* any more than Beverly did.

From where Will stands, her window to the courtyard has turned opaque and reflective as evening settles over campus. He's looking at his reflection as the lights time out and the office goes dark. In the glass, his silhouette in the lit doorway looks distorted, branches from the trees outside visible in its negative spaces. It reminds him of antlers in a field in Minnesota, and Will pulls abruptly away from the door and takes few steps backwards. He looks left to right. Nothing but dark doorways up and down the hall.

It's too quiet. And Abigail— he didn't even give her his phone number. He should go home and check on her. He'll look in the evidence locker tomorrow, and Beverly be here, and the whole unit, phones and chatter, everything that usually annoys him. Will stoops to grab the granola bar and heads for the elevators to the lobby, walking too quickly and unable to slow himself down.

It's fucking ridiculous. There's no one in the main lobby, only the television mounted above reception with whisper-quiet election commentary and a janitorial cart parked outside a bathroom. Will's truck is at the opposite end of the parking lot because consultants don't get permits and visitor parking is not a priority at the Academy. Will swipes his badge through the turnstile and waits the eons it takes to blink green at him with his arms folded tightly over his chest.

Outside, it's noticeably cooler than that morning. Will sees tail lights on the road out, but there are few cars left and no visible people in the parking lot. Ridiculous, he thinks again, mouth dry. It's not quite night but it is dark, the campus trees looking clawed and strange against the charcoal sky. Will walks briskly, does not run, in and out of haloed orange light and the darkness between. It seems to take hours, his pulse loud in his ears. The truck is just at the edge of one halo, driver's side in shadow. Will goes to the passenger's side first, to drop off his heavy bag.

There's a fetish in the driver's seat. Will stops cold.

It's not the one he found this morning, or the one Abigail had brought with her. It's larger and better formed, with neat, symmetrical twigs and an oak leaf caught between them, still supple and brilliantly yellow. The middle is wound round with dark thread that glistens strangely; it takes Will a moment, but he realizes it's *hair,* not thread— long brown or black hair.

There's a smudge of something on the leaf, streaks of it on the seat. Will knows that color even in the dark, and that's what makes him shove the bag in the footwell and fumble in his pocket for his phone.

From behind him, there's a long, slow scrape of something hard over asphalt, loud in the still parking lot. Will freezes, hand clenched around his phone, listening.

It comes again. Closer.

Will's mouth opens, but nothing comes out.

Again. Again. Rhythmic, like dragging steps.

He should turn around. He should turn around, and look, because it's the wind blowing leaves, it's cardboard, it's a paper bag—

Something brushes against his jacket collar, and Will stops breathing.

It's a light touch, sliding just under his ear to his jaw. Dry, no temperature. It feels like wood or bone. Smooth. Will's eyes drop to the car seat, and the shadow slowly eclipsing his own. He can't make sense of the shape, only that it's big, and leaning close. Very close.

Something breathes out against the nape of his neck and Will's nerve breaks. He ducks and spins, a wide swing meeting air, because there's nothing there.

There's nothing there.

Will stares wildly around the empty lot, no nearby cars, no leaves, no debris. Nothing but his truck, the yellow lines and the light pole. He's breathing in huge, shaky gulps , collapsing slowly against the seat as his nerveless legs give out. "*Shit* ," he gasps belatedly. "Holy shit, holy *shit."*

He twists to look above the car, around it, behind him. The new fetish is gone but the streaks are still there, maybe more of them, and Will can't stop looking at them. He's not crazy. He must be going crazy.

It's happening again.

The phone in his hand rings, and Will yelps and nearly drops it before he catches himself. Breathes out.

It's his home number on the screen when he raises it to his face, and he answers on the last ring. "Abby?"

"*You didn't give me your number,"* Abigail says softly. *"I've been looking for it all day. I wanted to make sure you were okay"*

"Yeah, sorry. Sorry," Will says, still trying to get his breathing under control. "I'm fine."

"Are you coming home soon?"

"Right now," Will says, pushing himself upright on unsteady feet. Right the hell now. "I'll be there in half an hour, okay? And, Abigail?"

"Yes?"

Across the visitor's lot, an engine turns over. It's dark enough and far enough away that he can't see the driver in any detail, but the lines mark it as something well out of his price range — a 300, or even a Bentley, maybe. It takes a ponderous turn away from the curb and then

lumbers off towards the main road. Will watches it go, wondering if he'd missed someone else coming out. If they'd seen anything.

"Keep the dogs in the house," he says to Abigail, and slams the truck door shut.

End Notes

"Will and Abigail grew up as foster kids together and had an imaginary friend named Hannibal to protect them. Years later, Abigail shows up at Will's door after years of no contact, obviously scared and running from something. Will's nightmares have started getting worse, and it's all pointing to Hannibal being not quite as imaginary as Will thought. (the kids accidentally summoned a demon!AU >D)"

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